

Response to Oliveira on Doxastic Justification and the Basing Relation

Paul Silva Jr.
University of Cologne
psilvajr@gmail.com

May 20, 2019

Abstract

The basing demand on doxastic justification is a widely held and highly intuitive dogma of contemporary epistemology. In my [2015, AJP], I argued (only) that *the dialectical significance* of this dogma is severely limited by our lack of independent grounds for endorsing it. Oliveira [2015, AJP] sought to defend the basing demand on doxastic justification. Here I explain why Oliveira's attempted defense of the basing demand misses its mark. I also briefly suggest that there is an alternative way of defending the basing demand. The alternative way is reconciliatory: it shows that most epistemologists may have been right to insist on such a demand, but still wrong to treat it as a dialectically powerful tool in the assessment of certain substantive epistemological theories.

Word count: 2,982

1 Introduction

The distinction between propositional and doxastic justification is typically characterized as the distinction between *having justification to believe that P* (= propositional justification) versus *having a justified belief that P* (= doxastic justification). When characterized in this way the distinction between propositional and doxastic justification appears to highlight the obvious difference between having justification *to be* in a state versus *being in* a justified state.

Virtually all epistemologists reject the idea that doxastic justification is simply belief that P together with having justification to believe that P. Rather, they hold that at least part of what makes the difference between these two kinds of justification has to do with what one's belief is based on. For example, Alston [1989: 108] claims that:

[it's] conceptually true that one is justified in believing that p iff one's belief that p is based on an adequate ground.

And Huemer [2007: 40-41] says:

...justification for believing that p is not to be confused with *justified belief* that p... a justified belief must be held because of what provides adequate justification for it.

We'll capture this idea in the following way:

THE BASING DEMAND (TBD): Necessarily, S has a (doxastically) justified belief that P only if S believes that P on the basis of an epistemically appropriate reason to believe that P.¹

TBD is of particular interest because it's an intuition with bite. For it facilitates powerful arguments in support of heavy-weight epistemological doctrines. Here are just a few examples: Pollock and Cruz [1999] use TBD to undermine coherentism, and if they're right about that they cast a shadow over subjective bayesian epistemology as well; Silins [2007] and Neta [2010: 694] both rely on TBD in their justification of liberalism about perceptual justification; Huemer [2007] uses TBD to justify phenomenal conservatism; and Comesaña and McGrath [2014] use TBD to justify non-factualist views about reasons. TBD is able to do this work because *it asserts a link—i.e. the basing relation—between the bases of one's justified beliefs and the source of one's justification to believe*. If such a link exists, TBD threatens epistemological views that drive a wedge between one's source of justification and the basis of one's justified beliefs (like coherentism and anti-liberal views of perceptual justification). Similarly, epistemological views that are consistent with such a link are views that are supported to some extent by TBD (e.g. phenomenal conservatism and non-factualist views of reasons). Accordingly, TBD has seemed to many to have the dialectical power to help resolve (or at least advance) various disputes in epistemology since TBD is typically taken to be a fixed-point.

I [2015] suggested a reassessment of TBD. I motivated this reassessment in part by considering how TBD's counterpart would fare in the moral domain. The answer: it would fare quite badly since dominant moral theories entail that one can act in a morally justified way even if one's reasons for acting (i.e. the basis of one's action) is not morally appropriate. Just consider someone who saves a drowning child but their reason for doing so is to enslave that child when they reach adulthood: if one saves the child, that act is morally justified even if one's reasons for acting are morally reprehensible. But if one's reasons for acting are irrelevant to the moral justification

¹See I [2015] for lengthy citations. Some epistemologists prefer a qualified version of TBD since, arguably, there can be some instances of reason-free justified beliefs. The point here is that there are a wide range of cases where one's justification *is* dependent on one's epistemic reasons (e.g. inferential and perceptual beliefs) and in *those* cases most epistemologists think a suitably qualified version of TBD holds.

of an action, why should one's reasons for believing be important for the epistemic justification of a belief?

2 On Oliveira's Defense of TBD

Oliveira [2015] sought to undermine my concern with TBD by undermining the following argument:

THE PAIRITY ARGUMENT

- (1) When the term 'doxastic justification' is used in epistemic theory it expresses the same concept that 'moral justification' does in moral theory, namely, the concept of permissibility within a certain domain.
- (2) An action can be morally justified (=permitted) even if it's not performed for morally appropriate reasons.
- (3) What's true of the structure of moral justification is true of the structure of epistemic justification.
- (4) So, a belief can be doxastically justified (=permitted) even if it's not held for epistemically appropriate reasons. (from 1-3)

If (4) is true, then TBD is false.²

As a matter of book-keeping, it's worth noting that Oliveira's summary doesn't accurately represent my [2015] argument or conclusion. I [2015: 374] *explicitly* refrain from invoking any commitment to (3) as a premise in my paper. Rather, I use the moral case as an *analogy* to motivate rethinking what support there could be for TBD in the epistemic case. Moreover, my conclusion is *not* that TBD is false. Rather, I [2015: section 3] survey a wide range of ways of justifying TBD and shows that they either fail *or* they depend on assumptions that are theory-dependent in a way that makes certain appeals to TBD by prominent epistemologists question-begging.

Now, Oliveira's [2015: 391-392] primary move in defense of TBD is to draw attention to an important difference between agents' *actions* and their *beliefs*. For when it comes to states (like belief) that are not voluntarily brought about (and hence "non-agential" in some important sense) Oliveira presupposes that it's always infelicitous to read claims of the form 'S's ϕ -ing is permitted' in a way that involves relating an *agent* to a *norm* which the agent conforms to. Rather, such claims are best understood as positive assessments of a *state of affairs* that involve agents conforming to an ideal to a sufficient degree. So, for example, a claim like 'S's believing that P is epistemically permitted' should be understood as a claim about the epistemic *goodness* of a state of affairs: 'it is epistemically good that S believes that P'. If belief is non-agential in the way that Oliveira asserts, then (3) is arguably false. And if his interpretation of justification ascriptions is correct—i.e. that they're best understood in terms of *goodness*—then (1)

²(1)-(4) is not Oliveira's phrasing of the argument, but it's a faithful representation of his target.

is false too. More than that, if belief is deeply non-agential then I [2015: 377-78] seem wrong in my appeal to concepts like blameworthiness in my alternative explanation of what's intuitively problematic in cases of bad basing.

There are, however, various problems with Oliveira's defense of TBD. First, consider Oliveira's assumption that a belief's responsiveness to evidence should be understood in a *completely non-agential* way (like the swinging of a clock-hand). When one surveys the epistemological literature on belief and agency virtually all epistemologists agree that belief is not agential in the very same way that paradigmatically free actions are, e.g. actions like raising one's arm that are directly responsive to an agent's intentions in normal conditions. But even so, most (or at least *very many*) epistemologists also think that beliefs are *sufficiently agential* (and thus sufficiently unlike the movements of a clock-hand) to ground true ascriptions of responsibility, praiseworthiness, and blameworthiness to agents for holding their beliefs. The literature here is vast and undiscussed by Oliveira. So at the very least there is a significant range of epistemologists who have to deal with the Pairity Argument if they wish to leverage TBD in a dialectically fruitful way.³

There is a further pressing issue for Oliveira's attempted refutation of (3). It concerns the relevant disanalogy that'sought to highlight. For suppose Oliveira were correct that the only coherent way to understand statements of the form 'S is permitted to believe P' is in terms of 'it being epistemically good that S believe P'. Even then, there exists a disanalogy between the moral assessment of action and the epistemological assessment of belief. This is because moral theories often have something to say about which states of affairs are good. Indeed, it is arguable that a complete and coherent moral theory will come with an axiology that implies not only that some *actions are permitted* but also imply that the corresponding *states of affairs involving permitted action* are good! From this it will follow that circumstances where people act in morally permitted ways but for morally inappropriate reasons are circumstances where there is a morally *good* state of affairs (the state of affairs *just* involving S's ϕ -ing) nested within a *more inclusive* state of affairs that is morally *suboptimal* (the state of affairs involving S's ϕ -ing *on the basis of morally inappropriate reasons*). This *motivates* the

³For example, some have argued that beliefs can be volitional in a way that allows them to be assessed on the same level as actions (Weatherson [2008]; Peels [2015]; and Roeber [forthcoming]). Oliveira does note this. But there's more. For others think that it makes fine sense to assess both *actions and beliefs* in terms of *responsiveness to reasons* even if the responsiveness in the case of belief is not directly voluntary (Schroeder [2015]; Lord [2018]; Kiesewetter [2017]). This is related to the deliberative 'ought' (and the deliberative sense of 'justified'), of which Schroeder [2011: 24] says: "The sense of 'action' on which I claim that the deliberative 'ought' relates agents to actions *is very broad*. It can be the case that *Max ought to believe that p*, or that Max ought to be saddened by recent events, but believing that p and being saddened by recent events are not commonly thought of as actions." See also Wedgwood [2017], Way and Whiting [2016], Kiesewetter [2017], and Lord [2018] for further discussion and endorsement. Notice too that there are very well explored theories of responsible belief that don't make doxastic responsibility (and hence the fittingness of praise and blame) turn upon the extent to which belief mirrors actions in terms of voluntariness (Oshana [1997]; Scanlon [1998]; Heller [2000]; Hieronymi [2008]; McHugh [2014], [2013]; Peels [2017]; Rettler [2018]; and Smith [2008]). See also Sosa's *Judgement and Agency* (2015).

very same question that raised but in a way that's immune to Oliveira's worries about doxastic agency. Moreover, it identifies a positive epistemic property that is absent in cases where agents fail to base their beliefs appropriately: there is a *good* state of affairs nested within a larger *suboptimal* state of affairs.

Given Oliveira's preferred normative ideology, this is equivalent to saying that one can have a doxastically justified belief even if it's badly based. And, as far as can tell, Oliveira has offered no new reason to reject such a possibility that I [2015] didn't already address. Accordingly, considerations of doxastic agency seem almost entirely irrelevant to the question of whether or not TBD is true; at most, doxastic agency concerns our interpretation of *the deontic language* we employ when talking about TBD.

3 Doxastic Justification and Procedural Justification

There is an alternative way to undermine the Pairty Argument that I failed to consider. It has to do with an ambiguity in ascriptions of doxastic justification. On the one hand, when epistemologists characterize 'doxastic justification' they do so in a way that seems to make the object of assessment a *belief state*. (See the citations in the introduction.) Call this *the stative conception* of doxastic justification. On the other hand, when epistemologists provide substantive conditions for doxastic justification, like TBD, what they are offering is a procedural norm, i.e. a norm that places limits on *the permissible ways of arriving at* a certain state. Call this *the procedural conception* of doxastic justification.

It is this procedural issue that John Turri [2010: 315] drew attention to when he wrote that:

...we should ask ourselves whether it is plausible to think that *the way in which a subject makes use of his reasons* matters not to whether his belief is well founded [=doxastically justified]. ... In evaluating beliefs we are evaluating a kind of performance, the performance of a cognitive agent in representing the world as being a certain way, and when performing with materials (which, in cognitive affairs, will include reasons or evidence), *the success, or lack thereof, of one's performance will depend crucially on the way in which one makes use of those materials*.

Turri is asking about the epistemic successes of having a doxastically justified belief, and we can tell that even Turri is thinking of "doxastic justification" in the stative sense when asking about procedural norms for doxastic justification. For otherwise his comment would be trivially true. That is, it's trivially true that having a procedurally justified belief—i.e. having a belief that one arrived at via a justified procedure—depends on the way in which one arrived at one's belief. That's just what it means to talk about procedural justification. The non-trivial question that Turri is asking is whether or not having a statively justified belief depends on whether or not that belief is also procedurally justified. This is a substantive question all normative theories must address.

For in practical reasoning, politics, and morality we can ask whether (practically, politically, morally) justified *processes* are processes that *always and only* lead to justified *outcomes*. Consider the process of having carefully selected juries decide whether a person is guilty. Many view this process as justified in some important normative sense even if it sometimes yields unjustified verdicts. Similarly, we can imagine unjustified processes that sometimes lead to justified verdicts. Turri is, quite insightfully, raising these questions for our thinking about the epistemic domain.

These reflections draw attention to two readings of TBD:

(TBD-Procedural) Necessarily, S has a *procedurally justified belief* that P (=a belief that S arrived at via a justified procedure) only if S believes that P on the basis of an epistemically appropriate reason to believe that P.

(TBD-Stative) Necessarily, S has a *statively justified belief* (=a justified belief) that P only if S believes that P on the basis of an epistemically appropriate reason to believe that P.

This distinction gives rise to a reconciliatory response to I [2015] and the Parity Argument. For if the term ‘doxastic justification’ is ambiguous between stative and procedural readings, then two things are likely to occur. First, TBD will *seem* like the obvious truth that all epistemologists have treated it as. For it seems like the set of justified belief-forming procedures can only include belief-forming processes that are responsive to one’s epistemic reasons; after all, procedures that are unresponsive (or improperly responsive) to epistemic reasons will be regarded as epistemically reckless. Second, if ‘doxastic justification’ is ambiguous between stative and procedural readings we should expect exactly the kind of disanalogy that I [2015] drew attention to. For TBD-Stative is about states that one is permitted to be in. And when talking about permitted states/actions, dominant moral theories entail that morally permissible states/actions can be arrived at in morally impermissible and blameworthy ways.

It’s easy to see that this highly tentative “reconciliation” favors my primary conclusion about the limited dialectical value of TBD. For as noted above and as explored in more depth by I [2015], the dialectical power of TBD lies with its linking one’s *bases* for being in a justified state and *what justifies* being in that state. This is what TBD-Stative does. TBD-Procedural asserts no such link, it’s just about justified belief-forming *procedures*.⁴ Accordingly, it was likely correct in to (implicitly) assess TBD-Stative in my [2015], since that’s the disambiguation of TBD that’s in play in the aforementioned discussions of coherentism, liberalism, phenomenal conservatism, and factivity about reasons.

⁴See I [2015: section 3, Reason#6] for a discussion of the following way of bridging the procedural and stative principles: S’s belief state is justified only if S arrived at S’s belief in reliable way. This links the justification of states to reliable procedures, and it is a way of justifying TBD-Stative. However, as I [2015] explains, it’s not a way of justifying TBD-Stative that’s fit for the dialectical purposes that it’s standardly put to.

References

- Alston, William. 1989. *Epistemic Justification*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Comesana, Juan and Matthew McGrath. 2014. "Having False Reasons," in *Epistemic Norms: New Essays on Action, Belief, and Assertion*, ed. C. Littlejohn and J. Turri, Oxford: Oxford University Press: 59-79.
- Heller, Mark. 2000. "Hobartian Voluntarism: Grounding a Deontological Conception of Epistemic Justification." *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 81: 130-141.
- Huemer, M. 2007. "Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 74/ 1: 3055.
- Hieronymi, Pamela. 2008. "Responsibility for Believing." *Synthese* 161: 357-373.
- Kiesewetter, Benjamin. 2017. *The Normativity of Rationality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Littlejohn, C. 2012. *Justification and the Truth-Connection*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lord, Errol. 2018. *The Importance of Being Rational*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McHugh, Conor. 2014. "Exercising Doxastic Freedom." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*: 1-37.
- McHugh, Conor. 2013. "Epistemic Responsibility and Doxastic Agency." *Philosophical Issues, Epistemic Agency* (23): 132-157.
- Neta, Ram. 2010. "Liberalism and Conservatism in the Epistemology of Perceptual Belief." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 88/4: 685-705.
- Oshana, Marina, 1997. "Ascriptions of Responsibility." *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 34: 71-83.
- Oliveira, Luis R.G. 2015. "Non-Agential Permissibility In Epistemology." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 93/2: 389-394.
- Peels, Rik 2015. *Believing at Will is Possible*, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 93: 524-541.
- Pollock, J. and J. Cruz. 1999. *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge*, 2nd ed, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Rettler, Lindsay. 2018. "In Defense of Doxastic Blame." *Synthese*, 195/5: 2205-2226.
- Roeber, Blake. Forthcoming. "Evidence, Judgment, and Belief at Will." *Mind*.
- Scanlon, T. M. 1998. *What We Owe to Each Other*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Schroeder, Mark. 2011. "Ought, Agents, and Actions." *The Philosophical Review*, 120/1: 1-41.

- Schroeder, Mark. 2015. "Knowledge is Belief for Sufficient (Objective and Subjective) Reason," *Oxford Studies in Epistemology* 5: 226-252.
- Silins, N. 2007. "Basic Justification and the Moorean Response to the Skeptic." *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, vol. 2, ed. T.S. Gendler and J. Hawthorne, Oxford: Oxford University Press: 108-42.
- I, Paul. 2015. "Does Doxastic Justification Have a Basing Requirement?" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 93/2: 371-387.
- Smith, Angela M. 2008. "Control, Responsibility, and Moral Assessment," *Philosophical Studies*, 138: 367-392.
- Turri, John. 2010. "On the Relationship between Propositional and Doxastic Justification." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 80/2: 312-326.
- Weatherson, Brian 2008. Deontology and Descartes's Demon, *The Journal of Philosophy*, 105/9: 540-569.
- Way, Jonathan and Daniel Whiting. 2016. "If you justifiably believe that you ought to ϕ , then you ought to ϕ ." *Philosophical Studies*, 173/7: 1873-1895.
- Wedgwood, Ralph. 2017. *The Value of Rationality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.